

## What Is Deliberation?

'Deliberation' is long and careful discussion crafted towards making a decision. Deliberative processes emphasise the importance of reflection and informed discussion in decision-making. This allows people to adopt more nuanced positions on the issues at hand, with a better understanding of the trade-offs inherent in a given decision.

For deliberation to be effective, it is important that sufficient time and resources are provided for people to familiarise themselves with the various aspects of a question, discuss and reflect on the issues away from the simplistic sloganeering of political campaigning. The outcome of a deliberative process should be one in which people feel more able to make an informed decision on a given issue.

Citizens' assemblies are a form of deliberative democracy: processes through which citizens can engage in open, respectful and informed discussion and debate with their peers on a given issue.

A citizens' assembly is made up of a representative group of around 50 to 200 citizens, who are chosen at random from the general public, like a jury. The selection of members is stratified to ensure that participants are as representative as possible of the general population according to certain criteria – usually gender, age, ethnicity, geographical location, and social background. For this reason, citizens' assemblies are also referred to as 'mini-publics'. Random selection of members means that the wider public can be confident that members are fellow citizens, just like them, and are not representing special interests.

Members of the assembly meet over a number of weekends – from two weekends to twelve or more – to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations in relation to a particular issue or set of issues. The topics debated by an assembly are generally set by government or parliament, though members can sometimes choose their own agenda.

A citizens' assembly will typically go through three phases:

1. In the learning phase, participants get to know each other and how the assembly works and what its aims are. Relevant facts about the issue at hand are presented to the participants, who get to ask questions of experts and access background and contextual information.
2. During the consultation phase, campaigners from each side get to present their arguments, and be questioned on them. Sometimes, the assembly might run a public consultation during this phase to understand what the broader public thinks about an issue.
3. In the deliberation and discussion phase, the participants deliberate amongst themselves. Generally, assembly members will make recommendations to government or parliament at the end of this phase. In some cases, if these recommendations are taken up, they will be put to the people in a referendum (as in the case of Ireland). But it is usually up to elected politicians whether or not to follow the assembly's recommendations.

It is essential for a citizens' assembly to be balanced in terms of the information presented to participants. Generally, the organisers will set up an advisory board comprising of independent experts and campaigners from both sides of the issue to vet the information given to the participants.

The assembly's speakers will be carefully chosen to give equal representation to all sides of the debates. Participants will be carefully seated to ensure a balance of views and perspectives on each table. The table discussions will also be facilitated to ensure that everyone's views are heard, but the facilitators are barred from discussing the issues raised.

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Citizens' assemblies emphasise two important areas of democracy: the participation of ordinary citizens in decision-making; and careful, thoughtful discussion of the arguments for and against different options. Citizens' assemblies aren't just focus groups or consultations though. The goal isn't to just hear what people already think – but for the members to engage in serious, informed reflection on important policy matters with people they may never normally meet.

Citizens' assemblies and other deliberative processes can strengthen and supplement representative democracy, not only by giving politicians insight into informed public perspectives on complex policy issues, but also by building trust in the political process.

### **Citizens' Assemblies in the UK**

The ERS has been involved in and helped run three citizens' assemblies: two regional assemblies in South Yorkshire and the Solent region were held in 2015 and focused on devolution proposals; the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit was held over two weekends in September 2017 and made recommendations on the UK's post-Brexit policies for trade and migration.

The UK's first official citizens' assembly took place in spring 2018, when two parliamentary committees established the Citizens' Assembly on Social Care to support their inquiry into funding options. In autumn 2018, the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland was held and focused on aspects of social care provision.

### **Citizens' Assemblies around the World**

The first citizens' assembly was established in British Columbia in 2003, where 161 ordinary citizens deliberated on the issue of electoral reform. A similar assembly on electoral reform was set up in Ontario in 2006, comprised of 103 randomly selected citizens.

The most well-known citizens' assembly is that which took place in Ireland between 2016 and 2018. The Irish Citizens' Assembly followed the model of its predecessor, the Convention on the Constitution, which ran from 2012 to 2014 and whose recommendations had led to the 2015 marriage equality referendum.

The Assembly was composed of a chairperson, appointed by the government, and 99 ordinary citizens 'randomly selected so as to be broadly representative of Irish society' in terms of age, gender, social class, and regional spread.

Members debated on a number of topics, including removing the country's constitutional ban on abortion, a recommendation which was put to a referendum in May 2018 and supported by 66% of the population.

### **Further Information**

To stay updated on developments, follow the UK Citizens' Assembly's Twitter account at [@UKAssemblies](https://twitter.com/UKAssemblies)

You can find more information about the citizens' assemblies the ERS has helped run in the UK at [www.citizensassembly.co.uk](http://www.citizensassembly.co.uk)

For more information about the Irish experience, please visit [www.citizensassembly.ie](http://www.citizensassembly.ie)